



## EXPLORING PEER PERCEPTIONS OF MIXED-AGE PEER INTERACTIONS IN MIXED-AGE SECONDARY SCHOOL EFL CLASSROOMS IN GERMANY

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### Abstract

Research on peer interaction has shown that how peers perceive one another plays a role in how they interact with one another during classroom tasks, thus influencing their pair dynamics and learning. This study investigated peer interactions in three mixed-age English as a foreign language (EFL) secondary school classrooms in Germany. Mixed-age is increasingly used, but is under-researched in language classrooms. Ten mixed-age pairs worked together on ten regular classroom tasks which were audio-recorded. After the unit of work, individual interviews were conducted in order to elicit learners' perceptions of their interactions. The findings suggest that rather than perceptions of differing ages, it is the relationship among peers, perceptions of the partner's proficiency and learners' goals which greatly contribute to positive perceptions of learners' interactions and impact on how peers interact with one another. However, findings also reveal traces of elder learners exercising authority and control over their younger partners.

**Keywords:** mixed-age peer interaction; peer perceptions; EFL; classroom tasks; sociocultural theory

### 1. Introduction

Classrooms which are composed of two or three different grades are called mixed-age (M-A) classrooms (sometimes referred to as *multi-grade*, *mixed-grade* or *composite classes*). In one M-A class the grades can range from the 1st to the 3rd, from the 4th to the 6th and from the 7th to the 9th grade in the case of three-grade classrooms. Some schools

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may set up M-A-age classes out of demographic and economic necessity. Some schools may do so mainly because the teaching community believes in the positive pedagogical and social outcomes of this approach. The latter is the case at the research site. Schools that set up M-A classes based on such a belief, have become a common phenomenon not only in Germany but also worldwide (Lindstrom & Lindahl, 2011, Wagener, 2014). Research conducted in mainstream education M-A classrooms suggests that the very conceptual underpinnings of the M-A classrooms is based on the notion that the elder learners learn by helping their younger partners, while the younger learn by being helped by the elder (Wagener, 2014). In addition, grouping children across ages and grades reduces antisocial behavior (Hoffman, 2002) and promotes cooperative behavior, sharing, help and self-directed learning (Wagener, 2014). In contrast, research also suggests that M-A interactions are not always based on shared interests of children in an interaction and may even contain instances of elder children acting out authority and control over younger children (Huf & Raggl, 2015).

Having taught English as a foreign language in primary and secondary school M-A classrooms for ten years, I came to know the enormous pedagogical importance of peer interactions in these classrooms because many classroom tasks were completed in an interaction with a partner. I also became aware that my role as a teacher was very different to that in more homogenous classrooms in terms of age and ability in which I had taught before. Teacher-led sessions in my M-A classrooms were less frequent, and were mostly limited to an introduction of a new topic or of a new language. There was less time to practise newly introduced language together with my learners. A great deal of such work was done by students themselves during so-called study times, during which I was present only to a certain extent. My role in such study times was to circulate during individual or group work and, on occasion, to provide explanations or to serve as a resource. During study times students often had to rely either on their own language resources or on those of their peers. As a teacher in M-A classrooms, I simply wanted to know whether there is a pedagogical value for elder (usually more proficient) students to be paired with younger (usually less proficient) students. For example, given that a great deal of work is done in peer interaction, in pairs or groups composed of learners of differing ages *and* language proficiencies, I wanted to understand their feelings, thoughts and attitudes towards such interactive work.

Although some research has been conducted in L2 mixed-proficiency settings, to my knowledge, research conducted on peer-interactions within M-A groups/pairs in foreign language classrooms is scarce and no study has investigated peer perceptions among M-A learners in L2 settings. This article presents data that were a part of this PhD research project, which had three main aims. One of the aims was to explore how learners perceive their interactions with elder (upper grade) or younger (lower grade) partners. This is important as research (Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Watanabe, 2008) has shown that learners' perceptions of their interlocutor impacts on their engagement with each other's contributions, and thus affects opportunities for learning. Learning about learners' perceptions was especially important, as pairs under investigation were

learners of different ages and proficiencies. For example, perceiving a partner as a novice with low abilities can result in dominant behaviour by the elder/more proficient learner and with the younger/less proficient learner taking a rather passive role (Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Watanabe, 2008).

## **2. Literature Review**

Vygotsky (1978, 1986) argued that knowledge and cognition are constructed through social interaction. Bearing this in mind, a consideration of how social relationships impact on the nature of interaction, and thus learning, is important. However, only a few studies on peer–peer interactions have focused on participants’ linguistic behaviour during the interaction and elicited learners’ perceptions, attitudes or feelings about the interactions they experienced (Fernández Dobao & Blum, 2013; Kim & McDonough, 2008; Storch, 2005; Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Watanabe, 2008). Studies without such accounts neglect the role of emotions impacting learning outcomes (Swain & Miccoli, 1994; Swain, 2011), or the fact that each learner displays his/her own agency during their classroom learning (van Lier, 2008). Agency was defined by Ahearn (2001, p. 112) as ‘the sociocultural mediated capacity to act’ which also ‘entails the ability to assign relevance and significance to things and events’ (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 143). Moreover, some researchers (Swain & Deters, 2007) argued that in L2 research insufficient attention is given to social factors and peer relationships.

Studies have mainly investigated second and foreign language learners’ perceptions and attitudes toward collaborative writing activities. Studies have generally reported learners’ positive perceptions toward the collaborative writing experience. For example, the participants in Storch’s (2005) study mentioned that pair work allowed them to pool their linguistic resources, and to express their ideas in different ways. They also reported enhanced grammatical accuracy and vocabulary learning. However, five participants expressed some reservations, which were related to their limited language abilities, which in turn made them cautious to express their opinion. Two participants expressed feelings of nervousness and embarrassment by their limited language skills.

Fernández Dobao and Blum (2013) investigated Spanish FL learners’ perceptions and attitudes toward collaborative writing in pairs and in small groups. Learners who worked in pairs valued active participation while learners interacting in small groups mentioned that they were able to share more ideas and knowledge, and therefore more opportunities for language development. Interestingly, a third of all learners did not perceive a positive influence of collaborative activity on linguistic accuracy or L2 development, but merely as an opportunity to practice previously acquired knowledge of the foreign language’ (p. 375). Moreover, majority of learners perceived that ‘little or no learning can occur from working with other learners or the same proficiency level, even though the analysis of their interactions revealed the contrary’ (2013, p. 375). This points to the gap between what learners perceive and what actually occurs.

Finally, Watanabe's (2008) study explored interactions and reflections of adult ESL learners who interacted with either a higher- or a lower proficiency peer on problem solving tasks. Regardless of their partner's proficiency level, peers reported that they prefer working with adult peers who shared many ideas (2008, p. 627). Importantly, learners valued that their partners were willing to engage in collaborative dialogue with them, regardless of whether they were more proficient or less. This seems to indicate that these participants valued collaborative dialogue as an opportunity for learning (see also Watanabe & Swain, 2007). However, not all pair work seemed to have provided occasions for learning. The higher proficiency learner of the expert/passive dyad did not seem to trust in or expect much from his lower proficiency partner in terms of contribution to their pair work. This in turn made his lower proficiency partner take on a passive role. In contrast to this, learners who despite of proficiency differences between them, formed collaborative pattern of interaction, perceived their contributions to be equal which in turn seemed to have positively impacted on their interactions. This finding led Watanabe (2008, p. 626-627) to suggest that 'the way individual learners interact with their partners affects the way their partners interact with them, regardless of their proficiency differences'. According to Watanabe (2008), this explanation is to be attributable to learners' agencies and the varying relations among agencies in particular, which are sometimes conflictive and sometimes collaborative. The strength of the design of Watanabe's study is that through the examination of how the *same* student interacts with peers of different proficiency levels, the co-constructed nature of agency is revealed (2008, p. 627).

### **3. The Present Study**

This article reports findings related to the investigation of learners' perceptions of their interactions with elder (upper grade) or younger (lower grade) partners. In order to better determine to what extent learners' perceptions reflected their pair interactions, the qualitative analysis of the interviews was complemented with the analysis of transcribed audio-recordings.

### **4. Research Question**

- (1) How do German learners of English as a foreign language at an alternative secondary school, organized in mixed-age pairs perceive their collaborative work over a unit of work lasting two and half months?

## 5. Method

### 5.1 Context and participants

The context of this study were three English as a foreign language classrooms at an alternative secondary school in Germany. Because learners' language proficiencies widely differ and very low proficiency and very high proficiency learners share the same classroom, such great heterogeneity in terms of proficiency is the main argument for an individualized and learner-centred approach at this school. Therefore, learners are usually allowed individual learning paths and to progress at their own speed and level. Learning relies on assignments, which learners accomplish either on their own, with a partner, in small study-groups, or with the teacher's help, depending on their needs and abilities. English curriculum at the research site consisted of three lessons a week of which two were teacher-led lessons and one was *self-study time* (Studiezeit), during which I (teacher-researcher) was not present, and during which learners worked on tasks included in their *study plan* (Fachplan). The study plan used in the current study consisted of subject areas and assignments for the whole unit of work, lasting two and half months. It contained collaborative tasks and exercises which were to be completed with a self-selected partner, as long as he/she was of a different age/grade. The reason for this step was that allowing learners to choose their partner is the usual practice in these classrooms, as revealed in the interviews that had been conducted with other language teachers. Twenty-four learners who attended three M-A classrooms took part in this study. However, the data is available only from twenty learners due to illness and attrition. Twenty learners formed ten pairs composed of 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders (see Table 1). They have learned English since grade 3. The majority of learners have known each other for a long period of time. Some spend a considerable amount of time learning together and doing assignments related to other subjects. All female learners opted to work with other female learners while all male learners chose to work with their male peers.

One of the drawbacks is that learners' language proficiency could not be assessed independently of school based assessment. Participants' "relative proficiency" can only be made visible by two classroom achievement tests which were taken throughout the first term. These tests measured listening, reading and writing competences. The last classroom achievement test was taken by the learners two weeks prior to the unit of work. Their "relative proficiency" was also determined by other summative classroom assessment practices which aimed to assess learners' speaking skills, grammatical knowledge and vocabulary. Summative forms of assessment were supplemented by formative assessment practices in the form of observation of learners' performance during lessons and taking notes. All assessment practices were administered by me. Table 1 shows relative proficiency score as determined by all the assessment practices mentioned above. However, these assessment practices differed across grades, and a true comparison of learners' language abilities is not possible. In other words, the

assessment practices were specific to grade, and therefore the description is relative to the particular grade, and not an estimate relative to overall proficiency.

**Table 1:** Participant characteristics

Pair number	Name	Gender	Grade	Relative proficiency
Pair 1	Lara	F	9	H
	Ella	F	8	H
Pair 2	Emilia	F	9	A
	Stella	F	7	A
Pair 3	Irena	F	7	A
	Sara	F	8	A
Pair 4	John	M	9	H
	Will	M	7	H
Pair 5	Lea	F	9	H
	Jess	F	8	A
Pair 6	Lilliana	F	7	H
	Leni	F	8	A
Pair 7	Riki	F	8	A
	Lyn	F	7	L
Pair 8	Gussi	M	8	H
	Jossi	M	7	H
Pair 9	Lenka	F	8	A
	Lucy	F	7	A
Pair 10	Alena	F	8	H
	Enna	F	7	H

H: high proficiency/A: average proficiency/L: low proficiency (relative to year group as assessed by the first term assessment practices)

## 5.2 Tasks

Over a period of two and half months, learners carried out in selected pairs eight tasks and two exercises. However, some pairs carried out more tasks than other pairs due to their illnesses and extracurricular reasons. Some tasks were carried out during regular English lessons, which were taught by me. Some were, however, carried out by the learners in the so called study times, during which I was not present. Tasks included mainly collaborative tasks, which combined speaking, writing and reading. Learners also collaboratively carried out two grammatical exercises, which were aimed at a practise of certain linguistic items, which had been introduced by me. Some tasks implemented were consistent with some general frameworks of task-based language teaching and learning (see for example, Samuda & Bygate, 2008) according to which *a task involves holistic language use, achieves one or more meaningful outcomes, or is made up of different phases*. In order to achieve ecological validity, I used tasks and exercises provided in the text-book, which were a part of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade syllabus and were included in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade textbooks named Orange Line 4 and 5. However, since 7<sup>th</sup> grade learners also completed the tasks in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade syllabus, when necessary, these tasks were simplified in order to accommodate for their abilities.

### 5.1.2 Examples of tasks

Although pairs carried out ten tasks, due to space, I will only include three tasks and one grammatical exercise here.

**Table 3:** A description of four selected tasks

Task	Description
Comic	Ss jointly read the comic and work out the meaning of the story. Then, they jointly completed a grammar exercise (pre-task phase) in order to practice the backshift of tenses before engaging in the main task. Later, they wrote the comic as a story and read their story to the class. In the subsequent 45-minute lesson (post-task phase) learners were asked to complete related exercises individually. (135 minutes).
Text-reconstruction task	Ss jointly identified and filled in the missing targeted linguistic features. Later, they were asked to replace the identified features with different words. (40 minutes)
Looking for help?	Ss. jointly read a text concerning a teenager looking for help and three replies of agony aunt or uncle who are online experts, providing a confidential advice and guidance. Then, they sum up the main text, determined the replies and talked about what they would do in a similar situation. (30 minutes)
Grammar exercises	Ss jointly completed two grammatical exercises in order to practice and consolidate their knowledge of <i>phrasal verbs</i> and <i>infinitive with/without to</i> . (45 minutes)

### 5.2 A description of the data and the instruments used for data collection

The data was collected during the winter term, over one unit of work lasting two and half months in total. The following data collection instruments were used:

**a. Audio-recordings** included recordings of ten pairs interacting on eight tasks and two exercises. The length of the recordings varied across pairs and ranged between 30 to 60 minutes. Although some recordings were made by me during regular English lessons, the majority of them were made by learners themselves during the study time lessons. It has to be noted that some data is missing due to learners' illnesses or technical failure to record interactions properly.

**b. Artefact collection** includes student's pieces of writing, learners' notes and classroom achievement tests which were conducted individually at the end of the unit of work.

**c. Interviews** (see interview questions in appendix A) were conducted mainly within the first two days after the last task had been completed. They were about forty-five minutes long. Interviews were held in learners' L1 (German). The aim of the interviews was to understand participants' feelings and perceptions of their interactions with an older/younger classmate over the whole period. Learning about learners' perceptions is especially important in this context because it is likely that perceptions of partner's age or/and proficiency will affect behaviour on tasks at hand, and as such impact on learning (Watanabe & Swain, 2007). Interviews were audio recorded using individual microphones/digital recorders and transcribed using a transcription software f4. I opted for a semi-structured interview given that while I wished to ensure some level of order and the wording to be used during each interview, I also strived for a more 'free-flowing and indeterminate process' (2011, p. 158). Interviews were piloted twice. While piloting, I became aware that I tended to impose predetermined questions on my

learners, which seemed to have hindered the flow of talk as well as my neutrality as an interviewer. Therefore, for the main study, I attempted to preserve neutrality of our talk, and make it seem as if it was a conversation, rather than eliciting some scientific data using a set of prescribed questions. I tried to remain neutral during the interview process, to avoid opinions, to ask simple and open questions and to make my learners feel as comfortable as possible. However, because participants were my learners, it also became obvious that some tended to give what Edley and Litosseliti (2011) call 'standardized' answers based on what they thought was 'a right', 'expected' answer in order to please their teacher. For example, when asked about their perceived benefits of working with an elder or younger partner, some tended to give answers based on what they had heard from other teachers or the headmaster when discussing these issues. It follows that I do not claim that absolute neutrality was achieved, or that my identity as a teacher together with my behaviour and questions had no bearing or impact on what the participants said. In order to gain insights into learners' feelings, emotions and thoughts during pair work, applying stimulated recall (Gass & Mackey, 2000) could have contributed to a richer understanding of participants' views with regards to their own thinking processes and behaviour during interactions. These could have been missed from interviews alone, which were conducted after the unit of work. Despite their limitations, interviews provided some important insights into learners' perceptions and feelings, and were also helpful in order to understand what was actually happening during M-A interactions. Finally, the transcriptions of the interviews were compared with the audio recordings of the interactions. As such, combining audio recordings and interviews achieved method triangulation and content validity.

### 5.3 Coding and analysis procedure

The insights into learners' perceptions insights were gained during interviews conducted after the unit of work. The interviews were analysed for the following categories adapted from Watanabe's (2008) study: (1) *overall perceptions about the pair interactions* (2) *perceptions towards the degree of contribution*, and (3) *perceived learning outcomes*. Watanabe's study examined interaction between L2 learners of different proficiency levels and their perceptions. However, in contrast to Watanabe's study which investigated adult learners' perceptions about their interactions on one task only, the current study explored perceptions of children who interacted over an extended period of time across an array of tasks and exercises.

### 5.4 Inter-rater reliability – double coding

The second rater took part in two training sessions with me. There were a few disagreements with regards to coding of *perceptions towards the degree of contribution* and transcripts of audio-recordings. We reached a consensus in 92% instances. Later, we discussed differences and reached agreement.



## 6. Findings and Discussion

### 6.1 Overall perceptions about the pair interactions

With regards to overall perceptions about their pair interactions, 16 out of 20 learners expressed a positive attitude towards their interactions. Attitudes of three learners were somewhat mixed and attitude of one student was negative. Learners underlined the importance of a good relationship between them, their partner's ability to explain things and ability to offer help. This is exemplified by Alena (grade 8) who interacted with Enna (grade 7).

#### Excerpt 1: Interview with Alena, grade 8

A: *[That we understand each other well, that we can explain things well to one another and that we help each other.]*

Learners also expressed positive perceptions towards pair work as such; as a space which affords mutual help to occur, and gaps in knowledge to be filled. Learners were in general in favour of pair work as compared to individual work. For example, Lenka (grade 8) perceived helping one another to be the enjoyable aspect of pair work which distinguishes it from individual work. Interestingly, she acknowledged that her younger partner Lucy's help was sometimes necessary as Lenka did not possess the necessary knowledge. Jessie (grade 8) valued working with her elder partner Lea (grade 9) as it provided her with opportunities to request assistance from someone who has some experience, without having immediately to ask the teacher for help. Irena (grade 8) said that pair work is better than individual work because it enables a confirmation of whether one's solution is correct or not, because when one works individually, one is left with his/her linguistic resources.

#### Excerpt 2: Interview with Irena, grade 8

I: *[Yes, because I feel somehow inside of the things, I feel more certain when the other thinks about it or has the same. And one is not so alone..., because then one is unsure, but with a partner, one gets a confirmation that what one is doing is in order and is correct.]*

Furthermore, the analysis of interviews and interactions has revealed two important aspects that appeared to have influenced learners' interactions, namely their goals (Li & Zhu, 2017) and perceptions of the partner's proficiency (Watanabe, 2008). For example, Leni (grade 8) responded that she greatly valued collaborative work with her younger but more proficient partner Lilliana (grade 7) whom she perceives as an English expert. Leni stated that as a result of her continuous pair work with Lilliana, Leni said that she learned a lot from her and considerably improved her English skills such as speaking skills as she was fully concentrated on English, worked intensively,

and spoke only English during pair work. Her words suggest that her goal was not to simply perform and complete a task, but was willing to master new language and knowledge, to extend her abilities and to gain greater control over her learning (Li & Zhu, 2017, p.3). In line with previous research (Li & Zhu, 2017; Storch 2004), this suggests that the level of commitment of individual learners to the shared goals as well as their individual roles in the pursuit of these goals impacts on how and to what extent learners engage with one another during their interaction. As Li and Zhu (2017, p. 3) rightly say, “*group/pair work is a goal-directed action in which one’s aims or objects or efforts, or desired results mediate group/pair interaction.*”

In addition to learners’ goals, Leni’s words [*She is an English specialist. She helped me a lot with the tasks. And I have learned a lot from her.*] suggest that her perceptions of her partner’s proficiency also influenced her interaction with Lilliana on the Text-reconstruction task. In fact, Leni’s perceptions were reflected in their interactions. As the excerpt below reveals, Lilliana assists her elder partner Leni. She leads Lena throughout the task and offers a variety of assistance, which is sensitive to the difficulties her partner is experiencing. She frequently encourages Leni to complete her utterances (turns 136), and patiently waits for her to do so. often checks Leni’s understanding of the text (turns 131, 133), as well as her understanding of grammar, or vocabulary (turn 140). What is more, Leni not only receives assistance when she directly asks for it but also when she doesn’t (turn 131). Lilliana clearly plays the role of an expert who is also perceived as such by her partner Leni.

**Excerpt 3:** Interaction Lilliana (grade 7) and Leni (grade 8) on the Text-reconstruction task

- 128 Le: After that I decided that it was dangerous to be a director. (reading and completing the sentence with the word *director*)  
129 Li: Hm. (praising, and giving a sign to continue)  
130 Le: than to be a policeman so I became a detective (reading and completing  
131 Li: [*Did you understand the story?*] (checking understanding)  
132 Le: [*Well...*] (Leni is not sounding certain)  
133 Li: [*Or at least the ending?*] (checking understanding)  
134 Le: [*Well, that the father was killed.*]  
135 Li: Hm. (praising)  
136 Li: [*And then?*] (inviting to continue, checking understanding)

Although this example is not typical for the data in the sense that the younger learner takes on a role of an ‘expert’ expert, it illustrates what was evident in other interactions, namely that learners’ goals and perceptions of the partner’s proficiency may greatly impact on how peers interact with one another. In addition, this case illustrates that even younger learners can take on a role of an ‘expert’ and this role can be accepted and valued by the elder partner.

In contrast, attitudes of four learners ranged from mixed to negative. For example, Riki (grade 8), the elder partner of Lyn (grade 7) expressed her preference for working with someone better at English than Lyn. She felt that together they could not complete the tasks, and that their interactions could not produce any learning outcomes. Riki only confirmed what was obvious from their interactions. Lyn acknowledged that she finds English difficult and that the tasks she worked on with Riki were too difficult for her. Pair Lara (grade 9) and Ella (grade 8) also expressed a somewhat mixed attitude about their interactions. Although both learners responded that they enjoyed working together, they also mentioned aspects that they disliked. For example, Lara disliked that she had to wait for Ella. Ella expressed some difficulty to cope with Lara's dominant behaviour when working together on tasks. In spite of this, neither of them expressed a preference for working with another student and both learners said that they liked their pair work. For example, Ella liked it because they often exchanged opinions. Their words, however, need to be taken with caution. The analysis of their pair talk suggests that Lara did not seek an opinion exchange at all, but merely imposed her opinions on Ella. This indicates that learners' *perceptions* may not correspond with their actual interactions. Below is an example of their interaction. The interaction begins by Lara self-repeating, and writing down what she believes is the right solution of the problem without seeking Ella's agreement about the solution (turns 101, 102). This indicates that she is not willing to involve Ella in the joint composition of the text and shows limited willingness to engage with Ella's suggestions (turns 103, 107) or seek a joint resolution. Lara does not even seem to take Ella's utterances into consideration (turn 108) and barely interacts with her. What is more, she responds in an argumentative tone of voice to Ella's suggestion.

**Excerpt 4:** Interaction Lara (grade 9) and Ella (grade 8) on the Comic task

- 101 Lara: came, come, came (self-repetition)
- 102 Lara: came to the date, his girlfriend (while writing)
- 103 Ella: [*But you should put a period here!*] (suggesting to Lara in a friendly tone)
- 104 Lara: [*Why is that?*] (argumentative tone)
- 105 Ella: To the date.
- 106 Lara: No...His girlfriend was angry... (argumentative tone)

I would like to argue that this case reveals an important aspect of M-A pair work that is rarely discussed in the literature (see Huf & Raggl, 2015 for an exception), that is that an elder learner may act out authority and control over her younger partner in terms of imposing her/his expertise during an interaction. Contrary to the claims of the mainstream education research that M-A classrooms promote cooperative behavior and help (Wagener; 2014), this case indicates that the elder learner may not necessarily take on a role of an 'helper', but may dominate or impose expertise on her/his younger partner. In fact, although Ella expressed her dislike with Lara's dominance, she

admitted that when working with other same-age or younger learners, she tends to dominate the task herself. In other words, her behaviour seems to resemble that of Lara during such interactions. [*Yes, I think that when I work with Enna and Lisa (younger classmates), I dominate simply and want to do more, because especially Lisa needs longer for her English tasks.*]. It also has to be mentioned that Lara and Ella have been friends for many years, and that Lara is someone Ella often works with, whom she respects, and is often inspired by. Therefore, it is likely that because Ella had to take on a passive role every time she worked with Lara, she could have simply imitated Lara's behaviour, and played Lara's role when interacting with other younger/less proficient learners. In other words, Ella's perceptions of her younger classmates being less proficient made her interact with them in a more dominant way, an exact same way that Lara interacted with her. It follows that perceptions of the partner's proficiency seem to impact on how learners interact with each other (Watanabe, 2008).

Overall, learners perceived their interactive work as enjoyable. Their comments underlined not only linguistic but also social aspects of their interaction such as their relationship, helping one another and complementing each other's weaknesses. In other words, learners' comments point to the importance of both the cognitive and the social dimensions of interaction. Moreover, their positive comments about their interaction are supportive of recent sociocultural research that claims that interaction is a cognitive and social activity which as such mediates L2 learning (Swain, 2011; Watanabe, 2008). What is more, they seemed to have been able to connect with their peers, which made it possible to ask and receive crucial help and to gain a deeper understanding of language and more confidence (see also Watanabe, 2008, p.625). On the other hand, one learner expressed rather negative attitudes which seemed to have been linked to her low proficiency and her inability to grapple with the difficult tasks. Although none of the learners seemed to have felt intimidated when working with his/her expert partner, interactions of four pairs contained traces of elder learners acting out authority and control with regards to imposing their expertise upon their younger partners. Finally, learners' comments revealed that in addition to learners' relationships, learners' goals (Li & Zhu, 2017) and perceptions of the partner's proficiency (Watanabe, 2008) that appeared to have a great impact on how secondary school M-A peers interacted with each other. These are all important pedagogical issues that must be taken into consideration by language teachers when making decisions regarding the optimal pairing of students in M-A classes.

## **6.2 Perceptions towards the degree of contribution**

In terms of perception of contribution to their interactive work, 16 learners answered that their contribution was equal, and that assistance was provided by both partners. For example, both learners of the pair Lenka (grade 8) - Lucy (grade 7) indicated equal contribution as well as mutual assistance. In contrast, four learners said that they had contributed more than their partners. For example, Riki (grade 8) pointed out that although she tries to help Lyn (grade 7), such as by providing her with explanations,

Lyn does not seem to benefit from her help. Consequently, Riki has to complete the tasks on her own. Lyn actually acknowledged that Riki was the one who mainly contributed to the tasks.

**Excerpt 5:** Interview with Riki (grade 8)

R: *[It is always like that...Lyn can do even less than me and it is already hard for me...It is then sometimes stupid when we work together. Then, nothing comes out, and it is impossible to move forward.]. [Well, it is difficult then. It is difficult for both, because I {stress is on I, expressing that she must then do the extra work but exact words are inaudible} explain it then to Lyn, and she cannot do it anyway, that is why I do it.]*

It needs to be mentioned that in case of four pairs, learners' perceptions did not reflect their interactions as exemplified in the next excerpt. Although Lenka (9) and Lucy (8) stated that they contributed equally, the analysis of their interactions reveals quite the opposite. This interaction comes from their interaction on the Text-reconstruction task. They are attempting to replace the word *experiment*.

**Excerpt 6:** Interaction Lenka (grade 9) and Lucy (grade 8) on the Text-reconstruction task

- 30 Le: *[Ok. Now, let's simply do this and then the word science.]*
- 31 Le: *[Ok the 9. Experiment, ideas, right?]* (referring to the number which marks the word *experiment* in the sentence)... and he often helped other kids who didn't know how to do the experiments in the class....(reading)
- 32 Lu: (proposing a word which is incomprehensible)
- 33 Le: *[Or what is Erfindung?]*... invention?
- 34 Lu: *[This is...]* He helps other children who don't know how to do the experiment in the class, so... (reading)
- 35 Le: *[Versuch {an experiment, a trial}... An experiment is a good word. ... Oh yes... maybe we should swap them. Shouldn't we swap them somehow?]* (Lucy is silent)
- 36 Le: *[What?... Here I have German... I cannot make it anymore]* (sighing as she could not find the right word)
- 37 Le: *[Trying? ... One can try it although I think that the word trying itself is a verb. The word Versuch {trial, experiment} has a... inaudible... Can we fill in Versuch?]* (Both learners seem to be looking for a word)
- 38 Le: *tried* (mispronounces) inaudible
- 39 Lu: And he often helped other kids to who didn't know how to do the triad (mispronounces *tried*) in the class (reading the sentence with the word *tried*)
- 40 Le: *Ja, das past gut. [Yes, it sounds good.]*

As this excerpt shows this interaction is dominated by Lenka, the older student. This is indicated by a higher number of turns, and by length of her utterances. Lenka also took on the role of the scribe. However, it seems that Lenka only engages Lucy in the interaction when she is facing a difficulty with the task at hand and cannot do without co-constructing ideas with her. As we can see, Lenka merely requests confirmations of her own utterances (turns 31, 33, 35, 37). She clearly dominates the task and takes a greater responsibility for task direction and completion. One explanation for Lenka's dominant behaviour may be that she perceived Lucy's proficiency to be lower than hers. It seems that this perception prompted Lenka to take on the role of a scribe which in turn could have contributed to her dominance. In fact, research has shown that the effectiveness of pair/group work may depend as on the roles assigned (Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Willis & Willis, 2007). Finally, Lenka and Lucy's case shows that learners' perceptions of their interactions do not necessarily reflect of what occurs during them. In other words, what learners say that they do may not match with what they actually do.

Overall, findings suggest that despite differing ages, most learners perceived that they equally contributed to the tasks. This is rather surprising as a higher degree of contribution on the part of the elder or the expert learner was anticipated. Moreover, with the exception of Lyn (grade 7), all learners pointed out that help was provided by both partners instead of just one. The majority of learners said 'we helped each other'. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we should assume that the elder or higher ability students will as a matter of fact assist their younger or lower ability peers in a way that a teacher does, and that no additional teacher's assistance is required. In fact, Lyn and Riki's case provides some support for Kowal and Swain's (1994) concerns that the very low ability learners in particular may not benefit if sufficient help is not provided (see also Leaser's, 2004). These studies suggest that it may be very difficult for the 'novice' in the expert/novice pair with a large proficiency difference to internalize all the language and information originating from the more proficient expert peers. It follows that the teacher's task is then to closely monitor heterogeneous pairs or groups so that the younger/novice learner may benefit and the elder/expert learner will not leave out his novice partner from the interaction (Kowal & Swain, 1994; Young & Teddick, 2016). Moreover, the findings indicate that perceived proficiency differences may impact on how roles are assigned by learners themselves prior to pair work, which in turn seems to impact on each learner's contribution.

### **6.3 Perceived learning outcomes**

Perceived learning outcomes involved a variety of aspects including learning how to pronounce words correctly, acquisition of new vocabulary, understanding of new grammar as well as improved speaking, writing, reading and translation skills. Learners also pointed out that their pair work allowed them to practice the target language. When asked about learning outcomes, 16 learners indicated that they perceived benefits in the realm of learning new vocabulary, 12 learners indicated that

their pair work allowed them to practise, and to consolidate language, which had been introduced by the teacher. Six learners reported that they benefited from giving as well as from providing explanations. For example, Jossi (grade 7) mentioned that he understood his partner's Gussi's (grade 8) explanations well as they were matched to his level. Lenka (grade 8) thinks that she generally benefits from providing explanations to others as it leads to consolidation of her already existing knowledge. She also benefits from receiving explanations from another peer as they complement the teacher's explanations, and as such lead to a deeper understanding. She also said that she enjoys giving explanations.

**Excerpt 7:** Interview with Lenka, grade 9

Le: *[Actually yes, because I can consolidate it myself. And for me then once more when I explain it to her, and then I can revise it once more for myself. I believe that one can learn from it. So when I hear it from you (referring to the teacher) only once, and when I let others explain it to me, that is better. Yes, I do enjoy explaining things to others.]*

Furthermore, six learners reported that their pair work provided them opportunities to engage in discussions about language, and to resolve linguistic problems. In other words, their words suggest that their pair work promoted collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000; 2006), namely a dialogue during which learners are engaged in resolving linguistic problems. In addition, learners viewed that they gained a greater understanding of the language because their 'expert' partners provided them with additional explanations of linguistic features which could not be understood solely from teacher's explanations. Interestingly, four learners also reported that individual learners brought to their interactions different skills, which helped to complement the other partner's gaps and to arrive at a correct solution. These learners brought different but necessary skills to their interactions which allowed them to resolve problems that they may not have been able to resolve individually. This resonates with Ohta's (2001) claim that learners sometimes complement their weaknesses and strengths. Comments indicating that learners filled each other's gaps in knowledge can be also found in Watanabe's (2008) study. For example, Irena (grade 8) mentioned that while she knew the grammatical forms, her partner Sara (grade 7) knew the vocabulary. In addition, three learners mentioned that they learned how to collaborate better in order to support one another.

Furthermore, the analysis has also revealed that while younger or novice learners perceived learning benefits, their expert or elder partners tended not to. For example, John (grade 9) did not report any particular perceived learning outcomes from his interaction with Will (grade 7). Also, Riki's (grade 8) perception of learning outcomes seemed to be limited. Riki said that she would prefer to work with someone she can rely on as she felt frustrated about putting too much effort to explaining things, which were not understood by her partner Lyn (grade 7) anyway. In line with other

studies that examined learners' perceptions (Kim & McDonough, 2008; Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Watanabe, 2008), the case of Lyn and Riki suggests that younger and low proficiency learners may feel frustrated when interacting with their elder and more proficient partners. Similar to Kim & McDonough study, Lyn's low proficiency did not seem to allow her to interact with Riki, despite her ongoing support. This is an important pedagogical issue that needs to be considered by teachers of M-A classrooms.

Excerpt 8: Interview with Riki, grade 7, AP

R: *[Hm. That I can rely that she/he'll do something, and that she/he will be able to do something at the end...and that one is not left alone there, and your partner does not understand at all what she/she should do...That is then stupid.]*

Similarly to Riki, Lara (grade 9) did not state any learning benefits. However, her partner Ella (grade 8) responded that the interactions with Lara helped her to understand better, and to reflect on her learning. They allowed her to see the gap between what she understands now, and what she does not. In this respect, their perceptions seem to resemble to those of expert/novice as Ella clearly sees Lara as a more knowledgeable partner from whom she learned. As pointed out in Section 6.1., Lara and Ella's case also suggests that a younger learner may feel distressed when her elder partner takes over and dominates the task (Kim & McDonough, 2008; Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Watanabe, 2008). However, in contrast to Lyn (grade 7), the relatively high language abilities/proficiency of the younger partner may allow her to interact with her elder partner and contribute to the interaction. What is more, the younger partner may even perceive learning benefits.

Overall, with regards to perceived learning outcomes, learners' perceptions differed within their pairs. While the younger and/or novice partners seemed to have perceived great learning benefits, three elder and/or expert learners felt that they did not learn much from their interactions. This is certainly an important pedagogical issue as the pedagogical concept of M-A classrooms is based on the notion that the elder learners benefit from teaching their younger partners. One of the limitations of the study is that it did not allow for an investigation of to what extent learners' perceptions of learning benefits actually reflect what they learned from their interactions. Nevertheless, it is evident that such perceptions hint on one of the most important pedagogical concerns for teachers in M-A classrooms, that is how to select and implement tasks/activities that challenge the elder/expert students within a group/pair, while avoiding that learning content is too far beyond the reach of the younger/novice student. For example, map tasks as well as jigsaw or spot-the difference tasks are 'one-way' tasks that require that specific information is communicated to the other learner who does not have it. Such tasks may be useful in M-A peer interactions because the younger/novice learner is required to communicate the information to the elder/expert learner in order to complete the task (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). As a result, more



negotiation of meaning and turn taking than on a two-way or a dialogic task may take place (Leeser 2004). Furthermore, in order to avoid the dominance of the elder/expert learner, each student of the pair may be given a responsibility for his/her contribution to the completion of the task. Willis and Willis (2007, p. 164) suggest to nominate one student as the *writer/secretary/reporter* for a pair or group, recording in writing what was discussed or agreed.

Nonetheless, in addition to the consideration of aspects of task design, it is important for the teachers to observe the actual implementation of the task, i.e. the learner's activity during task implementation (Ohta, 2000, p.76). Although there is certainly the need for the classroom teacher to adjust the task to the learners' abilities, the need to closely monitor what learners of various ages actually do with classroom tasks, and how their activity relates to their language development, is of primary importance. Future research on task design may explore how task implementation may best be done to foster equal participation and learning benefits for both elder/expert and younger/novice learners in M-A context.

## 7. Conclusion

This article has emphasised the importance to learn about learners' perceptions, attitudes or feelings about the interactions they experienced, and contributed to the body of research which has done so (Fernández Dobao & Blum, 2013; Kim & McDonough, 2008; Storch, 2005; Watanabe, 2008; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). The exploration of learners' perceptions is advocated by sociocultural theory as it underlines the role of social interaction in learning, and each individual student's agency during classroom learning (van Lier, 2008). Therefore, using interviews to learn about learners' relationships, emotions and goals may shed more light on what occurs during interactions, and their impact on how learners interact. In line with previous studies, the findings indicate that perceiving the younger partner as a novice with lower language proficiency may lead to dominant behaviour by the elder learner (Watanabe, 2008; Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Young & Teddick, 2016). Overall, the exploration of M-A learners' perceptions suggests that rather than perceptions of differing ages, it is the relationship between both learners, which seems to greatly contribute to positive perceptions of peer interactions. Finally, the main goal of the current study was to gain understanding concerning peer perceptions of M-A peer interactions. Building on this work, future research could further investigate the role of perceptions in how M-A learners interact with one another and what they learn.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview questions (original in German)

1. Tell me about pair work with ..... What is it like working with him/her?  
How did you feel during pair work?
2. Tell me more. What was it like working with your partner for the unit of work?
3. Do you think the pair work went well? Why? Why not?
4. How do you think it worked?
5. How do you work together – is one of you the boss?
6. Did you help one another? How?
7. What do you like about working with your partner?
8. Anything you don't like?
9. What kinds of things did you learn from pair work? What about in terms of English? What else? Anything else?
10. Did you like the activities? What did you like about them? Why not?
11. How did you contribute to the pair work?
12. How do you think your partner contributed?
13. Who do you think contributed more?
14. Would you prefer to work individually?
15. Would you prefer to do the task with a same age (same grade) partner? Why? Why not?
16. Do you think that you benefit from learning with older/younger partner? If so, how? If not, why not?
17. What is important for you when choosing a partner for your English assignment?
18. Who do you ask when you need help?

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